

Region's highway money faces cuts

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WASHINGTON -- Planned highway, bridge and transit projects across Northeastern states could be endangered as Congress readies for a difficult battle over federal transportation money, but Connecticut lawmakers are ready to fight to protect their share.

The Northeast has long enjoyed beneficial rates of federal funding for highways and transit.



Simmons

With powerful lawmakers on Capitol Hill, the region has been able to stave off attacks from other regions seeking more money every six years when the issue resurfaces in Washington.

This year's funding fight could be a different story. Some senior lawmakers, including New York's Sens. Pat Moynihan and Al D'Amato, are gone, while others, such as New Jersey's Sen. Frank Lautenberg, have lost some clout. Congressional power has shifted to other regions of the country. Leaders of the key transportation policy committees are now from the South and West. And the weak economy and growing budget deficit promise to intensify the battle.

But Northeasterners warn that they are ready to go to the mat to maintain their bounty. Most states in the region receive more in transportation funding

See ROADS, A2

FROM A1.

than they send to federal trust funds. Connecticut receives \$1.41 back for every dollar sent to the federal highway trust fund and a big chunk of annual allocations of transit money.

Their opponents in the Midwest, South and Southwest, where states get less money back than they send to federal trust funds, want to change the highway formula so that all states would receive at least 95 cents on the dollar. Connecticut would lose \$163 million annually under their plan.

A member of the multistate lobby

group seeking to change the formula said this fight isn't about being against the Northeast.

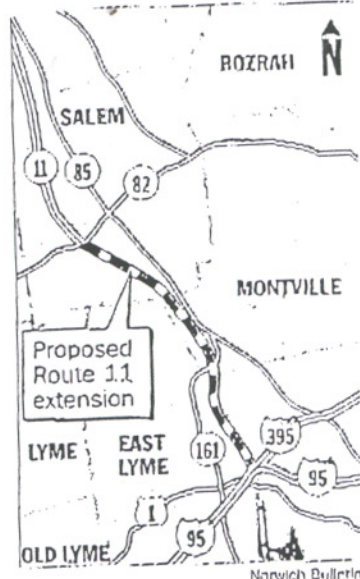
"Our argument has always been on the principle of equity," said Tonia Ramirez, a federal analyst at the Texas Department of Transportation and spokeswoman for the States' Highway Alliance for Real Equity, known as SHARE.

Northeastern lawmakers say they are counting on making friends and organizing to win. They already are nurturing coalitions across party and state lines with such unlikely partners as California, which is desperate for more transit money. The Northeasterners have myriad arguments ready.

Rep. Rob Simmons, R-2nd District, the only Connecticut member on the powerful House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, says the current system is fair because it was designed so states like Connecticut, with older infrastructure that is more expensive to maintain, would receive proportionately more money.

In response to SHARE, Simmons and other Northeastern House members have launched the Fair Alliance for Intermodal Reinvestment (FAIR) Coalition.

"At a time when capacity improvements are under way on Interstate 95 and we are working to finish Route 11, we cannot afford to see funding cut for transportation in our area," Simmons said in a statement.



In the Senate, members of the Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee are discussing an approach that would keep funding for northeastern states intact while increasing funding for other states.

"There will likely be a revolt if the solution is to take money away from states who are depending on that funding to continue very important infrastructure programs," said Dan Gerstein, spokesman for Sen. Joe Lieberman, a Connecticut Democrat and subcommittee member.

One of the Northeast's main arguments in favor of maintaining current transportation formulas is that when it comes to total contributions to the federal treasury, Northeast states get substantially less back for every tax dollar they send to Washington than other regions. Connecticut ranks 46th out of 50 states in return on federal tax dollars, according to the office of Sen. Christopher Dodd, a Connecticut Democrat.

Also, limiting transportation dollars could harm the transportation of goods between states, which would hurt the economy, Dodd said.

"A road that winds from Texas to Connecticut isn't going to do much good if it simply crumbles into dust at our state's borders," Dodd said.

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